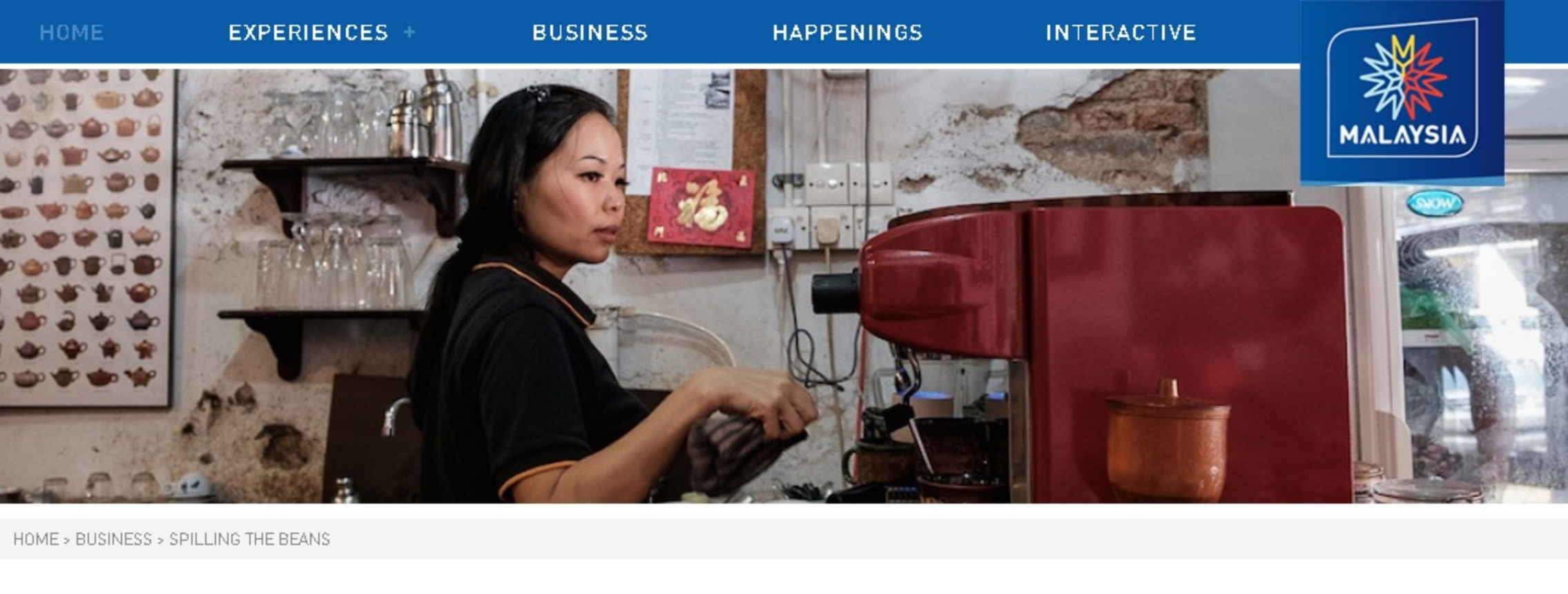




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SPILLING THE BEANS

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26 July 2017

In a corner lot along Jalan Ewe Hai in Kuching, Sarawak, "Coffee" Chang and his wife are quietly doing the laborious task of cultivating a local coffee culture.

Black Bean Coffee and Tea is one of the few places in the country that practices the art of preparing pure local coffee, from start to finish. The store is the brainchild of coffee connoisseur, "Coffee" Chang Jong Yaw, and his wife, Han Pi Chin, who conceived of it as a counterpoint to the traditional idea that local coffee options are limited to cheap kopitiams and three-in-one blends.



"I'm probably the first one to do pure coffee in Malaysia," Chang muses.

Prior to opening the store in 2001, he and his wife ran the Life Café, which catered to drinkers of traditional herbal tea. Both Chang and his wife have what he calls "nature names", which he says is "a way to get closer to the natural world" and the source of their livelihood. Chang is "Coffee", and his wife, Han, is "Green Tea".



There are two sides of the Black Bean empire: the customer-facing side, where customers can taste some of the store's fine brews and purchase packaged coffee. Then there's the backroom where they store their green beans and perform their magic on a traditional roasting machine.

The Black Bean store is like a glimpse into the past: wooden cabinets stocked with silk-wrapped boxes full of teapots and cups are shunted up against the walls; a long glass counter, burdened with jars of beans and coffee-making paraphernalia, draws the eye. A few chairs are scattered about for customers to enjoy a cup of Joe or tea. The house blend, War Coffee, features equal measures of arabica, liberica and robusta beans.



The store stocks both coffee and tea, but it's the coffee that commands your attention. Coffee has a long, storied history in Malaysia that reaches as far back into the time of Charles Brooke. Despite the fact that arabica and robusta beans are considered to be the best, plantations in Malaysia are usually seeded with liberica beans, which are largely seen as low quality and only good for instant coffee.

Malaysia isn't exactly a wellspring for coffee production due to its relatively weak supply of beans, explains Chang. The government has in recent years invested some money to cultivate coffee plantations, but much of the yield goes unharvested due to a lack of labour.



That revelation led Chang to move into his secondary role with Black Bean, as an advocate and educator. He and his team work closely with local farmers to help them boost the quality of their produce, as well as process and market them through his store. To achieve gourmet-standard coffee, the beans used must be of a high-grade, which is why Chang devotes significant amounts of time to help farmers with his knowledge and skills to boost yields and flavour, as well as price their products accordingly.



Black Bean also runs various courses, from tasting and cupping classes, to longer workshops for aspiring café owners. The way Chang sees it, helping to grow the coffee culture in Sarawak is beneficial to him as a supplier. He's also started running day trips into the scenic interior coffee plantations which serve the dual purpose of promoting his farmers' work and creating greater awareness about the need for land conservation.



In the last few years, Black Bean has experienced a particular surge in popularity, driven largely by TripAdvisor. Chang has become too good at his job: coffee drinkers all over the country are becoming more aware of the quality of local coffee, and are driving up demand for beans that Chang is worried he cannot meet.



Despite his fears though, the popularity of his business has proven that home-grown coffee can stand up alongside the great coffees of the world, and that his work is becoming more important than ever. "Usually when people come here and see our coffee is robusta and liberica, they are shocked, they say 'this is lousy coffee!'" recalls Chang. "When they see how we do our coffee and test it, quite a lot of people really like it."

Address: Black Bean Coffee and Tea 87 Ewe Hai Street (or Carpenter Street), 93000 Kuching, Malaysia (082 420 290). Open Mon-Sat, 9am-6pm.

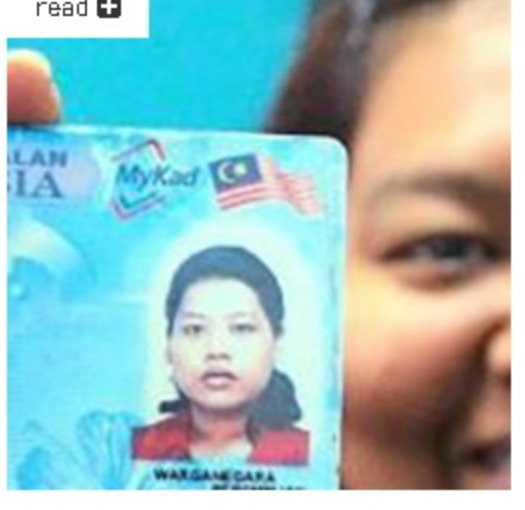
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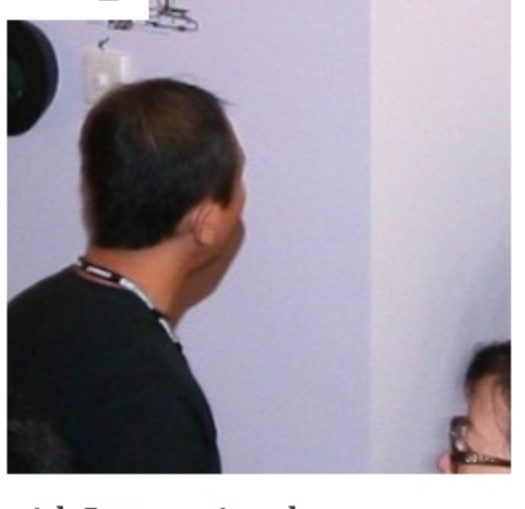
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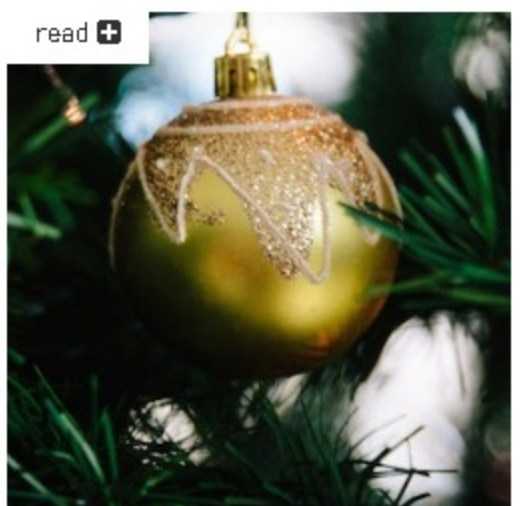
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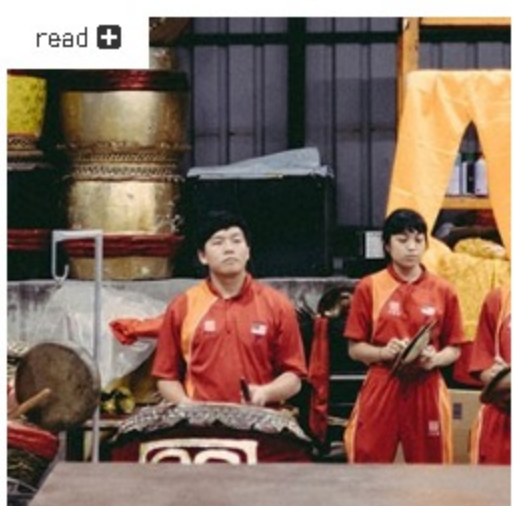
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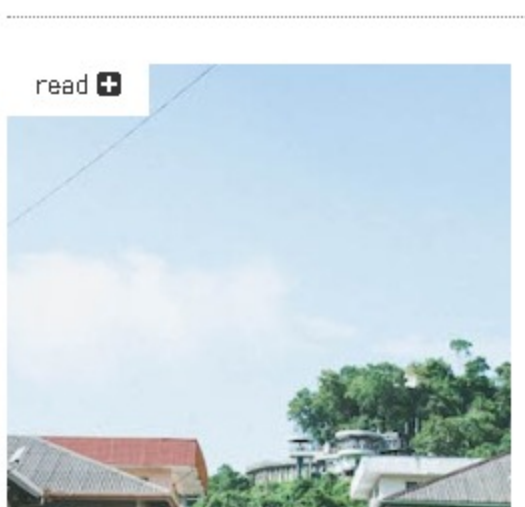
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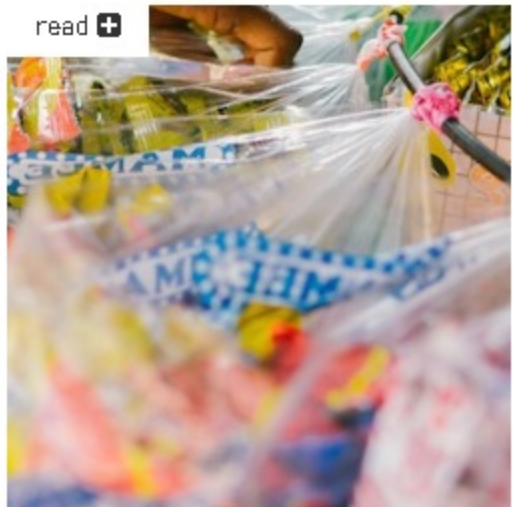
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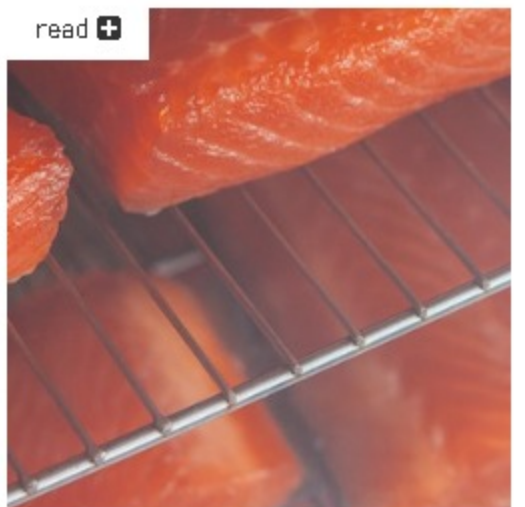
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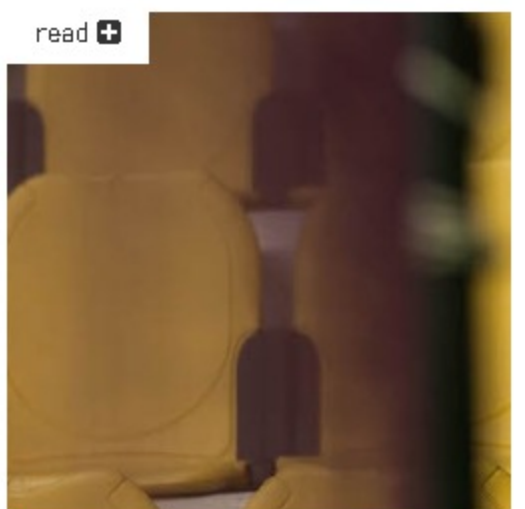
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